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DESTRUCTION OF CHINESE NUCLEAR WEAPONS CAPABILITIES

The bases for direct action against Chinese Communist nuclear facilities were explored in April 1964 in a paper by Robert Johnson of the Department of State Policy Planning Council,¹ which paper it was apparently decided should form the basis for any subsequent consideration of the subject.²

The paper considers four methods of destruction and draws the following conclusions regarding them:

1. Overt non-nuclear air attack (presumably US).

"Relatively heavy" (not further qualified) non-nuclear air attack would be required to destroy fissionable material production facilities to the degree that essentially complete rebuilding would be required. A question is raised as to how effective a job could be done with various alternative levels of attack.

¹ "The Bases for Direct Action Against Chinese Communist Nuclear Facilities" by Robert Johnson, dtd 14 April 1964.

² The paper purports to represent the broad consensus of the views of representatives of State, CIA, DOD and ACDA.

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2. GRC bombing. This is judged not feasible because of inadequate GRC capabilities. The paper also makes the point that any attempt to more than formally disassociate the US from involvement would be transparent.

3. Covert ground attack with agents in China. This is judged not feasible because of lack of assets.

4. Air drop of GRC sabotage teams. It is concluded that a 100-man team could possibly overwhelm security forces at a Chinese nuclear facility and damage the facility, though it is noted that really thorough destruction would be difficult. The possibility is reported to have been receiving serious analysis at the time of the Johnson report.

Destruction using nuclear weapons delivered by missile, air, or sabotage team is not discussed.

The following other observations are made in the report:

1. There is considerable uncertainty regarding the location of critical facilities. Soviet cooperation might help in this - my observation, GWR.7

2. Soviet cooperation or acquiescence would be improbable, the degree of improbability depending on the circumstances of the attack; i.e., whether or not ostensibly in response to aggressiveness in Southeast Asia, etc.

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3. Insofar as destruction of fissionable material facilities is concerned, the effects are not likely to last more than four or five years. For a longer term effect it would be necessary to destroy research facilities and personnel.

4. There would be substantial political costs associated with an overt, or discovered clandestine, destruction effort.

a. The political difficulties would be particularly great in the absence of clear provocation such as Chinese brandishing of nuclear weapons or intervention in Southeast Asia.

b. Something of a case for destruction could be made on non-proliferation grounds.

c. Our efforts to de-emphasize the significance of a Chinese nuclear capability would increase the difficulties in trying to make destruction politically acceptable.

d. Destruction would be more acceptable, particularly the non-proliferation case would be stronger, if there were being implemented at the same time other measures affecting nuclear capabilities, such as an agreed cut-off in fissionable materials production.

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The major conclusion of the paper is to the following effect:

"It is evident... has the significance of a Chicom nuclear capability is not such as to justify the undertaking of actions which would involve great political costs or high military risks."

This conclusion appears to be based on the observations summarized above regarding technical feasibility, impermanence of effect, and political difficulty, and, very importantly, on arguments to the effect that the near and medium term consequences in Asia of a Chinese nuclear capability will be small, and that direct threat to the US will be very small.

With respect to this last argument the paper makes a major point of the relative difference that exists, and is likely to exist for a long time, in US and Chinese industrial and military, and particularly nuclear strength. It is argued that for China to have either an effective pre-emptive capability or a credible retaliatory capability against all possible hostile powers would require her to

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become a major industrial power; and it is argued that even that would not entirely suffice since Class A power status is a relative matter and the US will continue to have much greater relative strength.

It would seem that this line of argument misses a major feature of the nuclear age: that a relatively small investment in offensive capability can make possible destruction of very great resources, and that it is all but inevitable that the time will come when relatively weak powers will be able to inflict very great and totally unacceptable damage on much stronger ones if they acquire nuclear capabilities modest by our and Soviet standards.³ The paper does not seem to consider adequately that in some respects we will be far more vulnerable than China for a long time; at least we are likely to be more concerned about, say, the loss of our two or three largest cities than would be China with respect to her's. Finally, as regards the China-US confrontation, the paper appears not to weigh very heavily

³ In the case of China that time is likely to be more than ten years off (which is unfortunately as far as most of the estimates look).

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the question of the effect that a limited Chinese nuclear capability might have in inhibiting us from using nuclear weapons in tactical operations in Asia.⁴

While the Johnson paper recognizes that a case for action against the Chinese nuclear capabilities could be made in part on non-proliferation grounds, in evaluation of the desirability of direct action it appears to give no weight whatever to the contribution destruction of such capabilities might make in inhibiting other countries from going ahead with nuclear programs.

On balance the Johnson paper seems to underestimate the medium, and particularly the long term (>10 years), effects that attainment of nuclear capabilities by China might have on the US-Chinese confrontation; and to give inadequate weight to the near term anti-proliferation effects of destroying Chinese nuclear capabilities.

⁴ Supporting papers argue, and somewhat convincingly that this factor should be heavily discounted, in part because for political reasons we probably have less freedom of action now to use such weapons than is perhaps commonly believed.

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In the light of reactions to the Chinese nuclear test (which of course occurred after the paper and supporting documents⁵ were written) it would appear that the political effects of the attainment of Chinese nuclear capabilities may also have been underestimated.

If it is judged that the Johnson paper may be deficient in these respects, further consideration of direct action against Chinese nuclear facilities, or at least consideration of exploration of that possibility with the Soviet Union, may be warranted.

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5 NIE 4-63, "Likelihood and Consequences of Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Systems," dtd 28 June 1963, and "A Chinese Communist Nuclear Detonation and Nuclear Capability, Draft Staff Study," by R.H. Johnson, Dept of State Policy Planning Council, dtd 17 June 1963.

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